THE POPULAR COMMITTEES: THE LOCAL, THE ORDINARY AND THE VIOLENT IN THE EGYPTIAN REVOLUTION

By

Ahmed Saleh

Submitted to

Central European University

Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

Supervisors:

Jean-Louis Fabiani

Don Kalb

Budapest, Hungary

June, 2016

ABSTRACT

This thesis argues for the prioritized productivity of the local, the ordinary and the violent in the framing and the analysis of the Egyptian revolution. I demonstrate this productivity through a case study in which I analyze the role of the Popular Committees (PCs) – the armed civilian neighborhood-watch groups that were formed in every street in Egyptian cities to compensate for the withdrawal of the police - in the revolutionary contention over the removal of Mubarak. Based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork, I use "the local" as an analytic category to draw the determinants of the variation in political relationships and inter-neighborhood class dynamics of the PCs in Alexandria and Cairo. While I hypothesize the PCs as a contender in a (Trotskyan) state-centered revolutionary situation, I use the lens of micro-sociological theories to interpret the identity, the politics and the agency of local, ordinary small actors. I conclude that, while the PCs were socially conservative, their localized, block by block, appropriation of the legitimacy of the use of violence, performance and narrativization of the police enforced a strategically significant nationwide civilian anti-police curfew. They, subsequently, created a dual power situation that restricted the choices of the incumbent regime and permitted those organized regime challengers, sitting-in public squares, to safely and performatively demand the removal of Mubarak and take credit for it. By including the millions of PC members, the public space construction of the streets of Egyptian cities, and the use of force, I rewrite the strategic model of revolutionary contention that removed Mubarak, redraw the political and social map of the early days of the revolution, and explain its later developments.

Keywords: Egypt, Revolution, Public Space, Political Violence, Contentious Politics, Social Movements, Ordinary Agency, Local Actors

1

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

To my CEU Sociology 2015 Class – including the two-years! This thesis is not especially for you – that would be an exaggeration – but my heart is and, I argue, will always be.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

I conform to the Transliteration Chart for the Arabic language provided by the International Journal of Middle East Studies, except for the Arabic Jim which I transliterate as pronounced in the Egyptian colloquial using G instead of J. But I do not conform to the rest of the transliteration rules of the International Journal of Middle East Studies. This is because I only strive for consistency. I italicize only the few cases when I transliterate words that are not people or place names.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

On January 30th, 2011, after spending the day marching with millions of people throughout Cairo, Muhammad Naeem (39), a longtime underground Egyptian communist activist, a political party leader after the removal of Mubarak, and a current political analyst and writer, was on his way home from Tahrir. Driving his family's luxurious SUV on a ring road, he encountered traffic barriers and a bunch of civilians standing next to it – in what was then known as a popular committee. After telling them he is coming from Tahrir and going home, a process that appeared to be a formality given his posture and looks that, relative to his interrogators, immediately labeled him as a highly educated middle class professional of some sort, Naeem turned his car on to continue his way. Before he pushes gas, one of his interrogators, carrying a long sword, shouted loudly: "Tell the revolution not to forget us, Bey."[1]

The man with the sword in the story above is one of millions of Egyptians who, after the withdrawal of the police on January 28th, armed themselves, went to the streets, enforced their rules in the Egyptian public space, and stayed there until Mubarak stepped down. Every one (of the 26 people) that I interviewed in Egypt (except for Naeem himself) seems to agree with the armed man and believe that the popular committees (*al-Ligan al-Sha'biyyah* or the PCs) had nothing to do with the revolution, which was rather happening in the central, organized and loud Tahrir square. The little available of primary and

---

[1] Bey was used to be the title of a governor or high official in the Ottoman Empire. Now used in Egypt as a courtesy title.

5

secondary scholarly works on the PCs suggest that there is little challenge to, and scrutiny of, this idea.

This thesis argues for the priority of the local, ordinary and violent phenomena in the sociological, anthropological and political framing and analysis of the Egyptian revolution. The body of the argument that the thesis contributes to this debate is channeled through a case study of the PCs during the eighteen days between the beginning of the revolution and the removal of Mubarak. However, I briefly review, below, theoretical arguments for the local, the ordinary and the violent, from universal, regional (Arab) and national (Egyptian) perspectives. I then introduce the phenomenon of the PCs, emphasizing its fundamentally mundane, simple, ordinary and spontaneous feeling. I follow this by hybridizing a theoretical approach for this study, in which state-centered theories are used for the hypothesizing of a revolutionary situation, in which the PCs are the agent, while micro-sociological theories of "ordinary agency" populate the concepts of identity, politics and strategy. I conclude this chapter by some remarks on my ethnographic methodology and fieldwork observations.

The thesis has two major chapters before the conclusion. The second chapter ethnographically establishes the phenomenon using "the local" as an analytic category that explains the variations in the structure and behavior of the PCs and determines their political and social tendencies. The third chapter employs the hybrid theoretical approach to interpret the identity, politics and strategy of the PCs and to conclude that they have indeed acted as an agent in a revolutionary situation. Based on this analysis, I demonstrate

6

the priority of the local in 1) redrawing the strategic model of revolutionary contention that removed Mubarak, and 2) in rewriting the political and social map of the early days of the Egyptian revolution, which I re-conceptualize and explain its success, failures and future developments.

1.1 The Theoretical Argument for the Local, the Ordinary, and the Violent

The argument for the priority of local and ordinary phenomena to social and political analysis has recently received strong traction, both in theory and in particular relevance to the Arab world and Egypt. A recent volume (Bouziane, Harders, and Hoffmann 2013) brings together a number of theoretical and empirical arguments, and introduces frameworks and methods, for the study of the local and ordinary in the ongoing transformations in the Middle East. The authors argue that political power and political relations are only visible and tangible on the local level, and therefore more amenable to scientific inquiry on that level. The authors find that academia is closer to central and formal political structures, and they do not shy away from characterizing their own endeavor for the inclusion of the local and the ordinary as political. On the regional level, the authors argue, state-centered scholarship on the Middle-East assumed the stability of authoritarian regimes and hence fails to explain the recent upheavals. On the other hand, numerous works on everyday localized resistance in the Arab World mapped out and understood their frameworks to be an instrument for the explanation of sudden national upheavals. The later works are especially relevant in authoritarian regimes because formal politics are not permissible (1-21). Harders, in her contribution to the book, focuses on

7

Egypt and contextualizes the priority of the local in her conceptualization of the pre-revolutionary social contract in Egypt as one of informality. According to Harders, while the Egyptian state gradually reduced its welfare duties to its citizens, it managed to maintain the Nasserist prohibition on participation in formal politics through its tacit approval of informalization. In the latter process, the citizens, individually, communally and within several types of networks, informally, locally and incrementally build houses, extend infrastructure, business and trade. This social contract is not sustainable though, as Harders argue, which explains the potential for the outburst of mobilization activities such as the recent Egyptian one (113-136). The "social contract of informality" limits formal and central politics, and intensifies them in the local and the ordinary, a situation, I argue, that is carried over, in a way or another, to the revolutionary contentious times. The fact that the vast majority of Egyptians were not affiliated with political organizations or movements before the revolution makes the analysis that is exclusive to central state institutions and political organizations and movements severely limited. This thesis overhauls this shortcoming within the intense eighteen days that witnessed the Egyptian state breakdown, withdrawal of the police and the removal of Mubarak.

The famous and influential Weberian concept of the state places the legitimacy on the use of violence at the center (Weber, Runciman, and Matthews 1978). Moreover, Kramnick (1972) observes that "Political change through violent means is the single defining characteristic of revolution most often cited in the literature" (28). In a more recent and more comprehensive work, Goldstone (1994) observes that there is a consensus on

8

viewing revolution "as purposive movements of an opposition that sought to wrest control of the state" (6). Gramsci (and Buttigieg 1992) argues that the state's hegemony over society is reproduced and channeled through the civil society, and therefore, the stronger the civil society the less direct physical violence the state needs to exert. Because civil society was stronger in the West, the state was able to manage radical and violent change and absorb more diverse political organizations and ideologies in a slower, longer-term, less-ambitious process of competition over hegemonic discourses in the civil society, a process Gramsci calls a "war of position." On Gramsci's trajectory, Egypt is probably located somewhere closer to the Russian case, in which the weaker civil society limits attempts at political change to opportunities of radical and violent "war of attrition." This thesis concludes that the Egyptian state had at least partial hegemony that it managed to maintain during the eighteen days and beyond, but the fact remains that the Egyptian revolution was more a war of attrition than of position, which makes the inclusion of its violent dimension in the framing and analysis necessary. The PCs, the case study of this thesis, demonstrate the significant role of violence and legitimacy on the use of force in the analysis of the revolution, and exposes the limitation an exclusive focus on Tahrir and social movements suffers from.

1.2 History is Written by the Activists: Literature Review

On January 28th of 2011, millions of Egyptians marched throughout Egypt and clashed with security forces until the police withdrew from the streets of Egypt - not to return for months. On that night - with no regional or national deliberation, and while the

country's Internet access and cellular phone services were shut down (Rhoads and Fowler 2011) – about every neighborhood and street in every city in Egypt witnessed the organization of a civilian so called "Popular Committee." These committees practiced minimal levels of inner governance and were mandated with various degrees of freedom to use force in order to guarantee security for their neighborhoods. This "rule" by the PCs lasted longer in some neighborhoods than it did in others, but the PCs mostly dismantled shortly after Mubarak's stepping down.

This thesis situates the PCs in the surrounding revolutionary contention over the removal of Mubarak. However, to accurately picture the PCs, one has to see them through their fundamentally mundane, simple, ordinary and spontaneous nature. Seven of my interviewees said that it was their idea to start a PC in front of their buildings or in their neighborhoods. A couple recounted the story of walking for hours across main streets in their neighborhoods, talking to their friends, neighbors and people on cafes about the need to form PCs. In many places, including cities and villages, people used mosque speakers to call on people to form PCs. In most cases, people had just participated in or watched the burning down of the police station in their district; or they looked out their window at the open Alexandria corniche and saw a string of smokes like pillars holding the city on to the heavens; or they watched state media reruns of people screaming for their lives, telling stories of thugs who broke out of prisons ambushing their homes and attacking their families. People simply grabbed what they found on their way, knives, wooden sticks, bicycle chains, or, if available, guns. In one case, the combination of the fear and

enthusiasm inspired one young guy to block his small side street with a long thick cable, connect it to a public electrical box from one side and control the connection from the other side to electrify the street in case of an attack. In another case, a PC member planted long nails in pieces of wood and employed them in case a car refused to stop.

But the fear and the enthusiasm did not find a reality to compete with. "Nothing could have happened," says Ali (35), a glazier who lives on a small side street in al-Hadarah. "How can a thug go through all these PCs before me to reach me. We would be seeing the person or the car being interrogated or searched in the PC before us and then they stop again for us. What can they do?" On the night of January 28th, Salah (25), a student from al-Asafrah, like many others, had to walk back from a demonstration to his home. "I just kept my ID in my hand. There was no point putting it back in my pocket," he said, remembering that he had to show his ID every about fifty meters for several kilometers. People tended to cluster at the intersections, in groups of three up to twenty or more. A typical encounter for a passerby would be first to be asked to show his or her ID. The closer the address in the ID, the friendlier the conversation gets, and vice versa. Some sort of a local tip, a name of a resident, a store or otherwise a reason to pass by the neighborhood is required for people to be allowed to pass. In the first two nights, people were seriously afraid for their families and for their property, but after nothing seemed to be happening, people relaxed, but continued to stay in the streets, mostly until Mubarak stepped down. It is this relaxing period, of about thirteen days, that this research finds most

productive, given the voluntary, innovative and performative nature of the behavior of the PCs and their public space construction.

It seems that the PCs are the primary subject of only five works: three journal articles, one PhD thesis and one conference paper. But three of these are concerned with the PCs post-Mubarak (Bremer 2011a, El-Meehy 2012 and Rayan 2013) and they highlight the significant differences between the pre- and the post-Mubarak phenomena. The pre-Mubarak PCs, those that occupied the Egyptian public space and were mandated with the use of force, are the subject of one journal article (Hassan 2015) and one conference (unpublished) paper (Bremer 2011b). The two provide rich firsthand ethnographic material. Hassan provides a thick description of two PCs in neighboring middle class neighborhoods in Cairo (al-Mohandisin and al-Duqqi) while Bremer's reach in Cairo is wider and more extensive. They both describe the initial emergence, the types of weapons used, some of the communication language, and the PCs imagination of the enemy. Bremer exploits the advantage of talking to PC members during the eighteen days to offer a wider descriptive scope, interviewing people from several districts in Cairo. The two works remain generally descriptive and primarily interested in the PCs for the direct purposes they served and the structures and behaviors they exhibited.

Bremer's and Hassan's, however, should be recognized for basing their work on field ethnography that considers the participants as a primary source of the data about the phenomenon. With the exception of Abu-Lughod (2012), which is primarily interested in the PCs in a small village in upper Egypt, about every other scholarly work that I found to

12

engage, to a degree or another, the phenomenon of the PCs during the eighteen days, derive its information primarily from activists - and particularly two individuals, one from Cairo and one from Alexandria – and their Facebook pages and publications, or relies on works that do so (see El-Meehy 2012, Holmes 2012, Said 2014, and a famous al-Jazeera 2016 documentary). Some of these works make next-to-impossible claims about who started the PCs and how many they were, assuming they were somehow operating under the command of one person or group.

I had a long interview with the Alexandria activist who is the source of much of the scholarly data about the PCs in his province. While he and his colleagues have certainly sparred no commendable and responsible effort towards the establishing of some level of second-tier organization, his efforts do not get any close to those claims. His interview exhibits activist tendencies towards generalization, dramatization and politicization. When pushed into practical details of how his group "organized the Alexandria popular committees," it turns out that some of his colleagues toured the city and collected some mobile phone numbers and mass texted them later on to have a few people show up in occasional meetings. On the ground, there has been practically no action or influence for these groups during the eighteen days. Most of the activity was mostly charitable and they took place only after the eighteen days.

A central assumption of this thesis is that the PCs cannot be genuinely understood in isolation of the historically exceptional times, spaces, and environments that they constructed and were constructed by - especially the revolutionary contention.

13

Additionally, because the PCs, to a significant degree, controlled and constructed the Egyptian public space for several weeks and practiced self-governance in a time of state-breakdown, they offer a rare comprehensive and multidimensional peak on fundamental social and political phenomena such as the Egyptian ideas on the legitimacy on the use of force, gender, class and religious dynamics, and social and political organization. In order to construct the universe of the PCs and discern their role and relationship to the revolutionary contention, I hybridize a theoretical approach that combines two theories from sociology, anthropology and political science: 1) the state-centered approach of Leon Trotsky and Charles Tilly, and 2) the micro-sociological small actor-centered approach of Asef Bayat and James Scott.

1.3 Revolutionary Situation through Agency of the Ordinary: Hybridizing a Theoretical Approach

In what follows, I break the barrier between state-centered theories of revolutionary contention and micro-sociological small actor-centered theories of – what I call – "ordinary agency." The hybridization process necessarily disembeds or decontextualizes "ordinary agency" theories, while redefining the constitutive components of the revolutionary contention theories. The end result is an approach whose utility extends to local, ordinary and violent phenomena in the Egyptian revolution and in similar contexts of social transformation.

Amy Holmes (2012) provides a convincing analysis of the interplay between structure and strategy in the eighteen days preceding the removal of Mubarak. In a novel

14

suggestion - although she does not elaborate on it or attempt to analyze it - she places the PCs within a context of a contentious revolutionary situation of dual power against the incumbent regime (405-406). Said (2014) discusses the PCs in the context of "outside Tahrir" phenomena that he finds marginalized in scholarship because of attention to Tahrir (197). He makes the same suggestion, but also briefly and while attributing the coercive power that the PCs practiced to the revolutionaries (30) – two very different phenomena, as this thesis details, especially in Chapter Two. To his credit, he later describes an ambivalent relationship between the PCs and the revolutionaries, and suggests that the PCs taking on the role of the police in the latter's absence can amount to a dual power revolutionary situation (211). Because the PCs are a secondary subject to the two works, accounting for them remains limited to activist sources, which, in turn, inhibits the depth of analysis they offer.

This thesis hypothesizes a "revolutionary situation," an analytic category that comes from a state-centered structural approach to revolution. It conceptualizes an intermediary contentious stage in which the state's central power and legitimacy are actively wrested and/or violently contested by one or more revolutionary agents, conceptualized as organized political groups or actors (Tilly 1978). Contrary to social movements, which are commonly understood to present demands to regimes using peaceful tactics, thereby, in part or indirectly recognizing the legitimacy of that regime, in revolutionary situations, according to Trotsky (quoted in Tilly 1978, 190) the state's challenger forcefully takes over significant parts of the state's power, apparatus and

15

function. The (Trotskian) analytic category has been neutralized and abstracted by several authors to include types of revolution in which the regime challenger can be composed of a coalition of classes or social and political groups, as opposed to Trotsky's working class exclusivity. It has also been abstracted to accommodate situations when there is more than one challenger, thereby addressing multiple power situations, as opposed to only dual ones (Tilly 1978, 189-194).

The plausibility of this model is both in 1) the fact that it permits the hypothesizing about, and the investigation of, whether the PCs have performed state functions, took over state apparatuses, forcefully contested the state's legitimacy on violence, practiced effective control over the land, and/or garnered the support – or, even more, the participation - of a significant portion of the population - and in that 2) it incorporates the exceptional environmental, spatial and political conditions that shaped and are shaped by the PCs, especially that of the state breakdown. The trouble with the model, along with the structural state-centered approaches, on the other hand, is in its institutionalist, centralist, statist and discursive biases that would rather exclude the PCs from the potentiality of challenging the regime. The contender postulated by the structural state-centered theories is one that is "a polity" (Tilly 1978, 91), assumed to be nationally organized, politically discursive and strategically contending for central state institutions, all are features that the PCs lack.

The reverse side of the structural state-centered theories are those that I call theories of "ordinary agency." They challenge, re-conceptualize and adapt classical categories such

as "political," "strategic" and "organized" so as to account for the agency of the non-traditional ordinary and small actors. This genre includes important works such as those of James Scott's (1985 and 1992) and Bayat's (2009). Scott (1985) attempts to challenge the Gramscian notion of hegemony by showing that a seemingly hegemonic class in a small village in Malaysia is in fact facing relentless (albeit unconventional) resistance from the poor and marginalized one. What seems, on the surface, to be a peaceful and politically stable society is in fact in a state of rebellion. Scott describes ordinary class struggle, which is not declared in public statements or channeled through unions or political parties, but whose tactics are foot-dragging, arson, sabotage, petty-theft and individual boycott. Scott extends his theoretical approach (in 1992) to many more systems of oppression, such as those of slavery, caste and serfdom.

Bayat's theory (in 2009), on the other hand, operates in the urban environments of Middle Eastern cities, where he goes beyond classical conceptualization of political actors and dynamics and rather accounts for the marginal groups' "encroachment" on the public space, and on the streets, thereby occupying it, reconfiguring it and, in that way, collectively politicizing it. While acknowledging that these actors and their individual actions are not strategic, planned or organized, *the accumulative effects* of their similar, repetitive and insistent actions change society and politics (1-96). Bayat's relevance to the phenomenon of the PCs comes not only from the extraordinary attention he grants to the public spaces and the streets, and his method of evaluating social change by aggregating the micro-actions of small actors, but also from the features he finds to distinguish his

17

phenomenon - which he calls "social nonmovement" - from social movements. Ordinary street political action is driven by necessity rather than ideology; it is action-centered, rather than discourse-centered; it does not demand, but practice or appropriate; and because it is effective in the long-term, it is reliant on "big numbers," usually millions of actors. These features, as I will demonstrate in Chapter Three, fit conveniently with the PCs and contrast strongly with the Tahrir phenomenon.

I characterize "ordinary agency" theories as the reverse of the state-centered theories because, while they go beyond the institutionalist, discursive and centralist biases of the structural state-centered theories, they miss the latter's advantage, which is the incorporation of the revolutionary and state-breakdown context. Scott and Bayat's endeavor is in accounting for forms of resistance *in authoritarian settings*. Bayat's (2009) "story of nonmovements is the story of agency *in the times of constraints*" (40, emphasis mine). His research is about the active use of public space when only passive use is permitted by the state (25). The PCs, surely, do not operate in such situations nor in Scott's backstage (1985). Both theories, moreover, try to account for what leads to revolutionary eruptions, to find what explains it and predicates it, while I work *within* an eruption.

I combine the two broad theoretical approaches - the state-centered revolutionary contention and the micro-sociological ordinary agency – in a way that harvests the advantages and neutralizes the disadvantages of both. In the hybridization process, ordinary agency theories are necessarily disembedded from the authoritarian contexts in which they were born. In the meantime, the constitutive analytic concepts of the state-centered theories

18

(such as actor, identity, political, organized, and strategy) are vacuumed of their meanings and are rather populated by the meanings provided by ordinary agency theories. In this arrangement, the state-centered theories provide the staging, both in terms of the revolutionary narrative and its dynamics of contention, and ordinary agency theories provide the lens through which the PCs' – and potentially other local, ordinary and violent phenomena in revolutionary and social transformation contexts - social and political agency can be observed, analyzed, interpreted and their accumulative effects theorized and accounted for.

1.4 2011 in 2016: Ethnographic Methodology and Fieldwork Observations

I spent a month in Egypt interviewing people who participated in, interacted with, and/or witnessed the PCs. Given that almost every male in every city had participated, to a degree or another, in the PCs, I had, in theory, a very large pool of candidates. In practice, however, the political situation and the crackdown on academic researchers (Association for Free Thought and Expression 2016) narrowed down the choices a great deal. The challenge was to find people who, in April of 2016, are willing to openly speak about the early days of the revolution - two periods with starkly different political situations and public attitudes towards about everything the thesis discuses (state institutions, political movements and parties, and even ideas of revolt, opposition and protest). Coupled with the challenge to shield the thesis from the activist bias thriving in my personal network of friends and colleagues, the choices were greatly limited and access was complicated. In order to work around these difficulties, I made sure that most of my interviewees are found

not through my activist network but through extended family members, neighbors, acquaintances, and other connections. To be sure, a minority of my Alexandria interviewees are activists because their perspective is necessary for me to be able to draw the full picture and answer questions fundamental to my thesis about the PCs relationship to political organizations, parties and activists. Nevertheless, I wished I could have had access to segments of the population that I could not reach. For example, in one district in Alexandria, as will be shown, small street drug dealers dominated the PCs, but none of them, for understandable, both legal and political, security concerns, agreed to talk to me, so I had to rely on the accounts of residents of the area, who nevertheless know them well and witnessed the events in the streets firsthand.

An important consideration I had to bear in mind is the collective memory impact on this research, since it is not concerned with a current situation or event in which I can utilize participant observation. Although I have surely witnessed the PCs firsthand and briefly participated in one of them. Fieldwork ethnography asked interviewees *to remember*, in some cases individually, and in some others in small groups. While the phenomenon, in historical terms, can be considered recent (since January, 2011), those five years carried out several radical changes that reconstructed the events and re-evaluated them. For example, the storming and burning down of police stations by the millions who marched on January 28th – an event which sets the stage for my period of inquiry and which I deal with frequently - was the source of pride for the nation during 2011. But in 2012, it has become a despicable conspiratory crime committed by the Muslim Brotherhood, whom

the general public have turned antagonistic to - less than a year after they elected them to both the parliament and the presidency. This type of development is not alien to studies of collective memory; Fentress and Wickam (2009) confirm that people remember not for the sake of retaining facts about the past, but for the needs of the present. Presenting several ethnographic and literary cases, one of which is about the national remembering of the French Revolution, Fentress and Wickam elaborate on the psychology of remembering and its necessary devices of structures and narratives. Their main argument is that memory is a social fact, and that the review, reconstruction and recontextualization of this fact are themselves social processes that can be historically recovered. The intensity of the change Egyptians experienced in the span of the past five years necessitates the awareness of the impact of recovering politically contentious history through the medium of oral memory. While some of the events recounted by the interviewees could not be verified or seemed unlikely after verification, the fact of the predominance of the memory, the sources they were purported to have been gathered from, the tone in which they were narrated, and the claims they were considered to prove were all taken into consideration in the analysis and the interpretation of the phenomenon of the PCs.

It was impossible to comprehend the phenomenon on the national scale in the time I had; therefore, the best strategy was to focus on one province or region. I chose Alexandria because, given the current security situation, it was best that I work in the most familiar of environments to myself: Alexandria is my hometown. But also because Alexandria is the second largest city in Egypt, and the cities are the places with the

21

strongest police presence, so they, consequently, were the places with the strongest PCs presence and mandate. I interviewed Salim (29), a resident of a small village (Abu Ghar) in al-Gharbiyyah province in the Delta agricultural region, and his account of the PCs in his village confirms my prediction. On January 28th, the village witnessed no demonstrations and the small nearby police station was not touched: "The station was occupied by two low ranking officers, one is from our village and the other is from a neighboring area; who are you going to beat up?!" Salim said. Additionally, Amir (35), an activist from a small town in al-Bihirah, as well as Abu-Lughod (2012), confirm that in villages, the residents stayed for a night or two at the village's entrances, then realized they only need to monitor the roads that connect the villages and the towns. Salim and many of his activist colleagues moved either to the province's capital or to Cairo to support the revolution or witness the events firsthand. The villages witnessed many of the dynamics the rest of the country witnessed, but for a shorter time and on a smaller scale.

In addition to surveying the field and exploring the relevant spaces, I conducted twenty-six interviews in total. A slight majority of these were with PC participants in Alexandria (15), in addition to seven with participants in Cairo and four with people from other provinces (three in the Delta: al-Bihirah, al-Gharbiyyah and al-Ismailiyyah, and one in Upper Egypt: Luxor). Because my subject is primarily about the PCs in Alexandria, I have only interviewed Cairo participants for purposes of familiarity with the larger national landscape and the provincial and regional contrasts. Therefore, it was of minor concern to my research that all the non-Alexandria interviewees were community, political or human-

22

rights activists except for one office boy. Only four activists from Alexandria were interviewed, and the rest varied in backgrounds between lawyers, students, clerks, a musician, a housewife, a glazier and a banker. I introduce people's jobs, ages and where they are from when they are mentioned for the first time. However, when the interviewee is a secular social, political, or cultural activist that identifies with the revolutionary movement of January 25th, I only describe him or her as "an activist," instead of mentioning his or her job because this fundamentally positions this person in relation to the thesis' context and method. The neighborhoods where interviewees lived varied between upper class (2), middle class (12) and lower class (7), in addition to one who participated in three PCs from varying classes and four interviewees from towns and villages outside the two largest cities in Egypt. Because the PCs participants were almost all male – an issue I address later in the thesis - all my interviewees are males, except for three women who spoke about their experience with the PCs. Similarly, because most of the participants in the PCs were in their twenties and thirties, those occupy the majority of my interviewees, except for three in their forties and one in her fifties. Figure 1, below, is a screenshot of a Google map that pinpoints the locations of the PCs that were interviewed in Alexandria. It gives a visual idea of the extent of the reach and the geographic diversity that my field ethnography and the data it produced enjoy.

Many interviews were conducted on the street where the PC, that is the subject of the interview, operated. Frequently, I sat with my interviewees in cafes where chairs are set out on the pave way or the road and, therefore, the interviewee could point at the

buildings, objects, distances, and whatever else that came up in the interview and can be seen around. After those interviews, I frequently walked around the area with my interviewees, had open discussions, observed the public space and its dynamics, and received a feel of the place. I protected the identity and the security of my interviewees by changing their names (except for Muhammad Naeem who asked me not to).
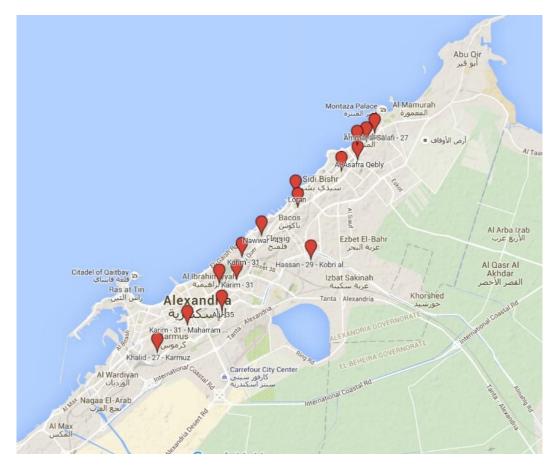

Figure 1: A screenshot of a Google map of the neighborhoods whose participants are interviewed in Alexandria

Committee selection gave priority to 1) the ones on the borders between neighborhoods with class gaps - so that behavior that is influenced by class would be more evident; 2) the ones next to businesses, both those that the community owns or where it is

24

employed (local shops) and national and multinational ones where the community is less affiliated; the hypothesis here is that this forces the PCs to make choices as to what to protect of these businesses and in what ways; 3) the ones next to state institutions, especially police stations or military posts; and 4) the ones next to protest squares, where sit-ins were held, whether for or against the revolution; the last two are assumed to have forced those PCs to make explicitly political choices and decisions in relation to the revolutionary contention. Assumptions that turned out to be correct, as will be demonstrated.

I mostly voice-recorded and later transcribed the interviews. The interviews were semi-structured and were framed in open and friendly discussions in the form of storytelling. In a typical interview, I mentioned the PCs in open sentences and let the interviewee say whatever he or she had in mind about them, just so that I get the strongest impressions and what the interviewee thought is important to mention. I used grand-tour and mini-tour (Spradley 1979, 45-78) open questions about how it all started, a typical day and a typical encounter with a car or a pedestrian, and so forth. When the interviewee was done, I followed up on, and stressed, the following themes: the interviewee's political and social backgrounds; his or her story especially with January 28th; the PC's relationship with the different politicized parties (army, police, activists and sit-ins); the role of the Islamists and of religion; the presence of women; the organization, demographics, armament, activity and space construction of the PC; violent and other significant events; dissolution of the PC and future representations or activities; and the opinion of the interviewee about

the political role of the PC, especially in removing Mubarak. Some interviews were especially focused on one theme or another. The interviews with women, for example, since they did not participate in the PCs, focused on their personal gender experiences. In one instant, the interview with the activist that attempted to organize the PCs in Alexandria was focused on this issue. Similarly, the interview with the NGO activist whose job from 2012 to 2015 was to organize post-Mubarak PCs in Cairo also focused on that.

CHAPTER TWO: THE ANALYTIC POWER OF THE LOCAL: ESTABLISHING THE PHENOMENON

Despite the shortage in primary literature on the PCs during the eighteen days, the two works (Hassan 2015 and Bremer 2011b), do a good job, as reviewed in the Introduction (section 1.2), in describing several aspects of the phenomenon. In this chapter, I do not attempt to exhaustively describe the phenomenon. Alternatively, I argue that the PCs are not defined by ideological interests, political orientation, or organizational alliances; they are rather fundamentally defined by their local nature, a feature by which I mean the priority of the local conditions and actors in the defining and the explaining of the PCs' structure and behavior. Carrying this particular meaning, I demonstrate the power of the local as an analytic device in defining and explaining the PCs' variation especially in two aspects that are relevant to my thesis. The first is political, namely the PCs' relationship to the regime challengers (or their revolutionization) and the second is social, especially regarding class relations. The resulting political positioning of the PCs – their alignment, rather than alliance, with the regime challengers - pave the way for the third chapter, which focuses on the PCs' relationship with the police and their role in the contention over the removal of Mubarak. The resulting analysis of their position on class, in the meantime, demonstrate their rather socially conservative character as opposed to the regime challengers in Tahrir. The contrast between the political and the social, ultimately, help explain both the (temporary and partial) political successes of the revolution (in removing Mubarak) as well as its social failures.

"No. We don't move outside our street. That was the idea. Everyone was guarding their street," Salah said. The localized nature of the PCs runs through all of its instances; it explains their evolution, adaptation to local environmental and communal conditions, their inter-neighborhood interactions, and their behavior regarding what to secure and what not to. This localized situation was intensified by the fact that cellular phone and Internet communications were shut down on the day the PCs emerged (Rhoads and Fowler 2011). The individual PC in the Egyptian city is a block-level phenomenon. That did not mean, of course, that every single PC behaved differently from the other. In fact, much of the PCs' behavior was clearly common, some even close to universal. However, none of the observed common practices, I argue, was elaborate or complex enough to have altered the local nature of the PCs. For example, when the PCs realized how painful and perhaps unnecessary for every pedestrian or a car to be forced to stop every fifty meters, they resorted to tactics that ease the process. Some signals have been developed so that, for example, drivers are asked to raise one of their cars' windshields, or the individual will be informed of a password (usually some very simple and silly word) that will take them a couple of streets further. I was informed of this practice in seven different neighborhoods in Alexandria and Cairo. However, Khalid (27), a clerk from Karmuz, amusingly recalls that when the PCs in his neighborhood decided that the raised windshield will be alternated on a daily basis, because drivers seemed to know the trick beforehand, the PCs were frequently confused, arguing over which one was supposed to be raised for the day, the right or the left.

28

Communication and organization did not go beyond block and street levels in any significant way either. The only common form of communication was "every once and a while, we go to the beginning of the street [at the intersection with the larger more main street] and shout 'Everything OK, men?" Ali (35) from al-Hadarah responded to my question about communication with other PCs. Some neighborhoods, and some constituencies, attempted to develop what can be considered second-tier organization, but, again, they have not, nor did they attempt to, alter, in any significant way, the local nature of the PCs. In some instances, there have been small groups that assumed a leadership position. For example, in Zamalik, an upper class neighborhood occupying an island in the Nile river, Yassin (36), an activist, described a Jeep car that frequently toured the island, checking if everyone is OK. At one point, some martial arts trainer tried to train some of the committees, but, according to Yassin, "it didn't take a couple of minutes, and it felt really ridiculous, and they gave up on it."

As we have seen in the Introduction (section 1.2), activists in Alexandria tried to develop some second-tier organization, to no avail. In smaller cities, secular activists created what can be described as PC support centers. Amir (35) in Damanhur, the capital of al-Bihirah, the Delta province neighboring Alexandria, and Abbas (35) from al-Ismailiyyah, the smaller city bordering the Suez Canal, enthusiastically described their initiatives. Some of what they did was announcing their phone numbers in mosques' speakers and distributing flyers of their contact information around the city. Their goals were mainly the calming of the alert neighbors, especially in the first two nights, and acting

29

as a networking hub for resources. Their efforts, on the whole, appeared, more than anything else, symbolic, and it has perhaps achieved its purposes. It was not in any way more than that. This is illustrated by the sad story Abbas recalls about the time when he was driving a pickup truck with the banner "Popular Committees," checking if everything is OK, when he was suddenly grabbed by one of the committees, beaten up and handed over to the army. Apparently he was mistaken for someone else with a pickup truck that the PC had been on the hunt for. No one actually knew Abbas, nor was expecting him to pass by. His initiative was spontaneously welcomed by the PCs, but that did not grant him even the least of recognition that can shield him from mistaken criminal suspicion.

Those who affiliated with the Salafi Call movement (*al-Da'wah al-Salafiyyah*) had their own district-wide initiatives. This particular movement is based in Alexandria and is very influential in Egypt.[2] On the night of January 28th, Ammar (27), a Salafi young man from al-Asafrah, went to meet Yasir Burhami, one of the movement's most influential religious figures, in his mosque in Sidi Bishr to ask him what to do. "He said go back to your [local] sheikh and tell him to help people secure their homes and supply their basic needs," Ammar said. Throughout the eighteen days, Ammar would walk around with his Shiekh, in their traditional Islamic dresses, crossing neighborhoods, and "just reminding people of God and reading them verses that advise them to stay united," he said. The overall goal of this action seemed to mainly create a friendly public opinion for the movement and

---

[2] After the removal of Mubarak, the movement decided to engage with politics and established al-Nur Party, whose coalition secured about 25% of the seats in the following parliamentary elections in 2011. See Egyptian Judiciary Committee for Elections (2011).

its (mostly distinctively dressed and usually locally known) members. In poorer neighborhoods, Salafis bought basic food supplies and sold them for their cost to counter the spike in prices, a practice that one of my (non-Salafi) interviewees, Hisham (29), a clerk from al-Asafrah, once did on his own initiative.

2.1 Alexandria vs Cairo: The Local as a Revolutionizer

As noted in the Introduction (section 1.2), urban cities, as opposed to rural towns and villages, were the natural habitat for the PCs. But variations were not only regional or tied to economic and geographic conditions; the PCs varied between cities in significant ways. In this section, I emphasize the analytic productivity of the local – i.e. the prioritized responsivity to local conditions and actors - to argue that the higher degree of localization in Alexandria, as opposed to the more central Cairo 1) improved the opportunity of negotiation, and hence, reduced the chances of hostility, between the sitting-in activists and the PCs, and 2) created a different dynamic of revolutionary contention in which the strategic priority of sit-ins was undermined, and where the emphasis shifted to demonstrations. The two differences relatively improved the relationship between the PCs and the regime challengers in Alexandria when compared to Cairo and especially around Tahrir. In other words, relative localization in Alexandria, when compared to centralized Cairo, acted as a revolutionizing factor.

The political behavior of the PCs in the center – in Cairo, but especially around Tahrir - were very different from its counterpart in Alexandria. The mere mention of the PCs in front of a Cairo political activist triggers expressions of annoyance and sometimes disgust. While most of the Cairo activists that I spoke to describe varied, but mostly more friendly, encounters with the PCs in their neighborhoods, far from Tahrir, in which some of them personally participated, their strongest memory of the PCs around Tahrir is resoundingly negative. They talk about harassments that range from accusations of

destabilizing the country, to appropriation of food and medical supplies they were carrying for Tahrir, to, in some rare cases, physical harassment and handing them over to nearby army posts. The situation in Alexandria was starkly different. Every single Alexandria interviewee, very casually, remarked, when the issue was brought up, that there have been no problems whatsoever – and many of them, like Shukri (30), an activist from Miami, recall walking several kilometers returning from demonstrations to their homes and passing by dozens of PCs in different neighborhoods. When I asked Shukri if the PCs asked pedestrians about political orientation or discussed politics, he said: "No. It's not their business. I mean, it wasn't like political this thing."

2.1.1 The Battle of the Camel: How the Local Fights and Negotiates

In Cairo, starting from the night of January 28th, protesters vowed to continue to occupy Tahrir until Mubarak steps down. In Alexandria, two sit-ins started about the same time, one around the most central train station, Mahattit Masr and the other around the second most central train station, Sidi Gabir. In the midst of the eighteen days, on the 2nd of February, Mubarak gave a speech, known as "the second speech" or "the emotional speech," in which he promised not to run for office in the next elections (The Guardian 2011). The speech managed to divide public opinion in the country. "Even within the revolution, a rift happened," Karim (31), an activist from Sidi Gabir, recounted. Shukri, on the other hand, could not participate in his block's PC that night "because of all the people I had to constantly argue with," he explained. But when Mubarak's sympathizers and some local ruling-party beneficiaries attacked the sit-ins across the country, in what has been

famously known as The Battle of the Camel,[3] public opinion seemed to have shifted against Mubarak. The ground dynamics of this episode and its aftermath differed between Alexandria and Cairo. I compare the two to demonstrate the power of the local in changing strategic priorities and relationships within a revolutionary contention.

I attended the Battle of the Camel in Tahrir. We spent the day and the night of February 2nd fending off civilians, a few of which had firearms, attempting to break into the square. Me and my friends did not know most of those standing next to us. In order to recognize that some of the attackers were affiliated with the police or the National Democratic Party (NDP), Tahrir protesters had to check their wallets after capturing them. The dynamics were very different in Mahattit Masr, Alexandria, according to three interviewees who attended the battle. "We recognized some of the attackers; they were being led by a [local] NDP financier," Hamadah said, and Karim later confirmed. Hamadah (42), a lawyer from Kobri al-Namus, along with Karim and Shukri all noted that the attack was fended off with significant support from street vendors, who sell conveniences in the square. Karim had the opportunity to recall these memories with the street vendors while helping them in the following years negotiate legalizing their situation with the Alexandria governorate. After fending off the attack, discussions and negotiations started, in which both the surrounding local residents, many of them were PC members, and the street vendors pushed for the conclusion of the sit-in - and their demand was met. "It was not

___

[3] The name started as a sarcasm, because the attackers infamously used camels to penetrate Tahrir. It is borrowed from the name of the year 656 AD's Battle of the Camel of early Islam. See a sample video of the Tahrir battle at Wafd News (2011).

34

wise to stay within a hostile environment, but also the street vendors knew of the street situation and advised us that it will be difficult to protect it," Karim thought.

The Sidi Gabir sit-in, on the other hand, continued throughout the eighteen days. Karim, one of its residents, thinks that the sit-in close to his home was not a very big one. "But it was very organized because it was managed by the Muslim Brotherhood," he said. Mahattit Masr, on the other hand, was full of liberal and leftist activists who are not nearly as organized as the Muslim Brotherhood. But that did not mean that the PCs around Sidi Gabir approved of it. "It was one of my neighbors who brought some knives and sticks and decided to tear the sit-in apart. These are very poor people, and not affiliated with anyone. The guy had a small kiosk on the main road to feed his kids and he thought the sit-in is harming his business ... The Muslim Brotherhood leader of the sit-in, Hasan al-Prince [who has become the city's Deputy Governor in 2012], accused the attackers of being thugs sponsored by the NDP." Because Karim is both an activist and a resident of Sidi Gabir, he was part of an intervention group that managed to negotiate a settlement. According to the agreement, the sit-in will be isolated between the walls of the station and the main Abu Qir road, and the PCs will not allow any crossover - except by those sitting-in activists who are also residents of the area.

From my experience and the interviews, I recognize that sit-ins are generally perceived by local residents to be a threat, given the potentiality of hostility they bring and the negative effects this can have on normal economic activity. I witnessed this hostility around almost every sit-in in Cairo from 2011 to 2013, and they had different ideological

35

orientations and different demands, including those of Tahrir, al-Abbasiyyah (Blomfield 2012) and Rab'ah squares as well as provincial sit-ins (EIPR 2014). The Alexandria PCs' participation in the decision making and their success in ending one sit-in and isolating the other are not developments that their counterparts around Tahrir did or, I argue, could have as easily done. Reflecting back on it, I can say that, roughly, I knew about fifty people sitting-in Tahrir during the eighteen days, about half of them were not from Cairo, five or six were not Egyptians, and about none were from the surrounding areas. In such a situation, the local hostility to the sit-in is activated but with lower opportunity for negotiation due to the absence of the bridging local activist demographic and the clear "foreign" appearance of the sitting-in protesters roaming around the square, which adds a sense of unauthorized appropriation of a space the locals consider their own. The higher degree of localization in Alexandria structurally favored a more integrated and a generally friendlier relationship between the PCs and the regime challengers by, first of all, increasing the chances of peaceful negotiation and settlement.

2.1.2 The Local Alters the Priorities of Ground Strategies

Furthermore, sit-ins did not seem to the regime challengers in Alexandria to be strategically effective. El Chazli (2016) argues that sit-ins were not strategic to protesters in Alexandria because of its geography, being a coastal strip. "No square was as big, central, and equidistant from all the protest sites as Tahrir Square was in Cairo," he argues. The article remains a brief recommendation for geographical approaches to social mobilization, as El Chazli concludes. It is not clear though how "centrality" and "relevant

36

size" are measured since Mahattit Masr is indeed seen as a large and central square in Alexandria. In fact, demonstrations in Alexandria used to reach Sidi Gabir, where there was a sit-in, but people just went home afterwards. "We could never fill the [Mahattit Masr] square because it was very large. Of course, Tahrir didn't have this problem. Most of Alexandria activists went there," Karim said. My analysis, on the other hand, relies on the degree of locality in explaining the undermined strategic value of sit-ins in Alexandria, as opposed to Cairo.

The Tahrir center was powerful in attracting regime challengers from across the nation. "After January 28th, my fellow activists travelled to larger cities to participate in the events, but they mostly went to Cairo, including myself," said Salim, who earlier (in section 1.4) described a lower level of street action in his village in al-Gharbiyyah. According to Karim, the main activity in the Sidi Gabir sit-in was watching satellite channels on big screens, which mostly covered Tahrir. "No one seemed to care for us. The numbers dwindled until even before the end of the eighteen days, it was practically over," he added. Sit-ins – as opposed to demonstrations – as my analysis suggests, are a more fundamentally performative activity that is inclined to prioritizes broadcast over personal, communal and localized advocacy. Alexandria interviewees, without explicit questioning, spoke casually of demonstrations as the revolutionary activity, and never mentioned sit-ins except if asked. "I wake up in the morning and join demonstrations until it gets dark, then I head home," Shukri described what the interviews confirmed to be a typical day for an Alexandria activist during the eighteen days. Demonstrations passing by a person's street, drawing his

or her neighbors to the demonstration, and making a strong show of numbers (and they were in hundreds of thousands at this time) can be argued to be more effective in influencing public opinion in a city than sit-ins. My interviewees recount how the demonstrations were sending local messages at every opportunity, and constantly using very intimate, moving and context-specific chants asking people to join. "People were so happy with us at the time, and you would hear the trills of joy [usually made by women in weddings and happy occasions] in the balconies," Shukri recounted.

The comparison between the ground dynamics in Alexandria and Cairo demonstrates that the degree of localization determined the strategic priorities of the revolutionary contention in each city, which, in turn, reflected on the degree of integration between the PCs and the regime challengers. In the following section, I contrast this relatively non-hostile political relationship between the regime challengers and the PCs in Alexandria with the latter's conservative social attitudes, especially towards class relations. In both cases, the prioritized productivity of the local, both as a subject of study, embodied by the PCs, and an analytic device, is demonstrated.

2.2 Class, Property and Street Rule: The Social Conservatism of the Popular Committees

In this section, I argue that while the local served as a relative revolutionaizer in Alexandria, compared to Cairo, it has, in other ways, served social conservatism. Through the deconstruction of the PCs conceptualization of "the thug," the charting of how the PCs constructed class, and how class constructed the PCs, I argue that the PCs, having no

38

political orientation or alliance except interest in local security, have – as opposed to Tahrir - fundamentally internalized pre-revolutionary social values, practices and relations, and worked to preserve them.

In the overall, the PCs demographic composition favored those who, for a reason or another, occupied the streets more than others. Therefore, young males constituted a large majority of the PCs, and in some cases, shopkeepers and doormen had a more prominent role in leading or advising their fellow members. The demographics of "occupiers of the street" differed from a place to another though. The lower class neighborhood of Karmuz is known to be a center for drugs. On the night of January 28th, Khalid heard some of the young street drug dealers conspiring to take over the police station, which they did. Later on, Khalid looked out his window and "found the undercover police hiding from the kids while they are shouting: 'There is an undercover hiding here,' and so on," he recalled. Starting the next night, the PCs were formed and were almost exclusively composed of those young street drug dealers. This has not been the case in any of the other neighborhoods where I interviewed people in Alexandria, including close-by ones with about the same level of class as Karmuz, such as al-Hadarah.

The conditions around the PCs appeared much more natural for the lower class neighborhoods, because they mostly have lower state presence (similar to the situation that Ismail (2006) describes in Cairo's informal quarters) and stronger everyday residential occupation of, and livelihood in, the streets and the public spaces. Additionally, for the PCs to properly function, a level of trust and intimacy between the residents is necessary, and

39

that is also readily available in lower class areas, as opposed to middle class ones. Bayat's (2009, 1-96) concept of the "quite encroachment of the ordinary" captures this condition. For the marginal groups, especially in a neoliberal city, public spaces and streets are livelihood. The streets of the lower class areas in Alexandria, including the small residential ones, are busy, full of people walking around, hanging out in cafes and shops and talking loudly to each other across the street, while street vendors fill up the pave ways with different products. In middle class neighborhoods, the residential streets are quiet and empty. "Why don't you study how neighbors knowing each other in the PCs changed society?" Hisham (37) from al-Asafrah asks me. "I didn't know my next door neighbor but on that night, I knew most of those living on my street." But Khalid, from Karmuz, describes a very different feeling of public space than that reported of al-Asafrah and other middle class areas: "The PCs were just sitting around, and the rest of the residents were sitting right next to them throughout the night, only on café seats, playing backgammon and smoking shishah ... No one was afraid of anything. And it didn't feel much different." In Maharram Bey, a lower class area, Karim describes how women will deliver large trays of delicious food and compares that to his experience in Smoha, a middle class one, where he could only get tea every once and a while. Shirin (25), an activist from Greater Cairo, was returning from demonstrations on January 28th when she was blocked by a PC that ordered her and her friends to go through Old Giza "because people are burning the Giza Police Station," she was told. In the small streets of lower class Old Giza, she encountered a traditional street wedding, complete with the music, the belly dancer, the hash and the

40

alcohol. This is at the hours when the PCs were being formed across the nation and fear peaked in the country.

2.2.1 Property Localized

The local nature of the PCs, coupled with their internalization of the police – the latter I argue in the Third Chapter - meant that everything in the block is the responsibility of the PC, including public, private, local, national and multinational businesses and property. Any looting or stealing is an infringement on the PC and a violation of its rules of enforcement.

I asked every interviewee whether any attempts at looting, stealing or violent confrontations in general happened, and about every one of them said that nothing memorable happened. In fact, the PCs had so much enthusiasm for guarding property that I heard several cases of mistakenly capturing people and treating suspects with unnecessary and disproportionate violence. Hisham's PC in al-Asafrah once suspected that a person stole a tool from a hair salon. Hisham enthusiastically recounts that he "ran behind him all the way [about one kilometer] to the Corniche and managed to make him fall. The people who were following me beat him severely, then I took him to the army post in [the nearby] al-Montazah Park." Sayyid (31), a student from al-Ibrahimiyyah, arranged that the private guard of the ATM machine of a multinational bank hides inside the bank and leaves Sayyid's PC to filter the people approaching the machine and to notify him to turn it on from inside if the approaching person is legitimate. While it is surely not exhaustive of all instances, it is a strong indication that my insistent questioning of all Alexandria

41

interviewees produced only two businesses that were successfully looted: a small antique shop on the main Abu Qir road and a Carrefour mall. The first is located on a main road that cuts through a large part of Alexandria, surrounded with residential areas but not inside one, and the second is the furthest a store can get from residential areas in Alexandria. "People were saying that Carrefour belongs to a Kuwaiti businessman who is Gamal [son of] Mubarak's partner, so it's halal to loot it … People came from the [lower class area on the] other side of al-Mahmudiyyah Canal with their tuktuks, took everything and displayed it along the Canal for crazy prices. I saw Apple laptops sold for 400 [Egyptian] Pounds [about USD65 at the time] … I went inside the mall the next day and there was nothing, not even shelves," Karim recounted. When I followed up by asking: "Where is the closest residential area to this mall?" Karim said: "No. It's further close to the highway to Cairo, far from any residential area." Disembeddedness from residential areas, the lack of a locality, placed the mall outside the protection zone of the PCs, and permitted its looting.

2.2.2 The Ambivalence of "the Thug": Charting Class Relations

The localized indiscriminate protection of property and considering it the responsibility of the PCs as a substitute for the police - the social conservatism - reflected on class relations in indirect ways. The PCs had an ambivalent relationship between the classes in which the lower class was considered both the threat and the security. I analyze those relations and deconstruct the PCs' concept of "the thug," in which class ambivalence concentrated and intensified.

As I indicated, the conditions of the PCs - i.e. lower state presence and intimacy between the neighbors and between them and the streets - were more natural for lower class neighborhoods than for those of other classes. This, in addition to the stereotype that assumes that the lower class is more prone to, or better at, violence, produced an ambivalent relationship between bordering low and middle class neighborhoods. On the one hand, the middle class assumed that the lower class is the threat, but, in the meantime, it also assumed that it is the security. The incidents reported to me, in which people from lower class areas attacked middle class ones, were either about rather confusing incidents that are difficult to interpret as criminal activity or they were stories about events in other neighborhoods and were difficult for me to verify. What is significant here is that these stories are recurring narratives that continue to occupy the social memory of the PCs. Randa (32), a civil engineering graduate and an activist who lived in Faisal in Cairo during the eighteen days, recounts a story that fully captures this ambivalent relationship:

> "Our street is a bit wide and we are sort of middle class … not like rich but like engineers, accountants and lawyers … there is these tiny streets behind us where very poor people live … I can see one of them from my room window actually, but my father used to keep it closed so I didn't know the street existed for years after we moved there … They are mostly handicraft workers and microbus drivers … My father once told me that [during the eighteen days] they kidnapped a girl and raped her. He was very sad … I don't know if this actually happened. I didn't see anything happening during this period … But I remember our committee saying they need to maintain a good relationship with them [i.e. the lower class backstreet committees] because they have the weapons and they are the ones who will defend the area when things get serious."

The ambivalent relationship with the lower classes interacted with the local nature of the PCs to produce a particular class construct and a dynamic around what everyone

43

called "the thug." While I argue in the next chapter that the police were a primary enemy of the PCs, my interviews confirm Hassan's (2015) thesis that "the thug" is the single most expressed enemy of the PCs. Hassan details how his interviewees in two middle class neighborhoods in Cairo, al-Muhandisin and al-Duqqi, imagined the thug. He starts by explaining that, for them, the home of the thug is located in three neighboring lower class areas, but then the notion of class is lost in the rest of the analysis. The way the thug looks like (including having a scar), speaks (using "a unique repertoire of colloquial terms and phrases"), and what he rides (cheap unlicensed Chinese motorcycles) are neutrally introduced by Hassan (394), while they clearly describe large segments of young males living in lower class areas in Egyptian cities. The way people looked was – and, in Egypt, from my experience, has always been - the primary factor in determining the way to treat them and whether to suspect them. "You just look at the person's face and you know if they are OK or not … Some people you don't need to see their IDs; their faces are their IDs," Ali said. A literally repeated notion in the interviews was the "His looks are wrong" and "He looks clean." Interrogating interviewees for the meaning of "wrong" and "clean" brings up similar class-based ideas to those that Hassan (2015) describes. I find some features in the "thug" who lives my own middle class neighborhood to be representative of his peers in other similar neighborhoods. He is a young man; has been to prison once for stealing where he was treated violently; has lower education than average; with a scar on his face; always struggling to find a job, so he does street tasks of carrying things or

44

guarding property when needed; and can be seen in fights and occasionally with serious injuries more often than any average adult in the neighborhood.

But because the PCs are a fundamentally local phenomenon, the local thug is an ally. In the beginning of my fieldwork, it used to come as a surprise to me hearing the thug frequently portrayed as the enemy, and then about midway in the interview, I am told: "Sometimes it's the thug who would be sitting under the umbrella and others will bring him the IDs or driver licenses to decide to let them go or to bring them over," like Shukri said about his PC in Miami, Alexandria, a middle class neighborhood. "They will search people but the biggest of them will sit under an umbrella," Khalid from Karmuz, a lower class area, said. "By biggest you mean elderly?" I asked. "No. Biggest in deviance," he said. The local thug was an ally whose mission is to secure the locality from the thugs – *of other areas*. In that way, "the thug" construct – as it related to class –was present as strongly in the minds of the residents of the lower class neighborhoods. "But you have a sense of vision, as we say. You can figure out the deviant from the respectable by looking at them," Khalid from Karmuz said. Sayyid's friends from al-Hadarah were recounting that they heard that some stealing happened in their lower class neighborhood. In trying to explain how, in their words, "this happens to an area full of outcasts like ours," one of them joked that "our outcasts were busy on a mission in [middle class] Luran." What is different about the dynamic that suspects the thug in the lower class neighborhoods, however, is that 1) it would have a more detailed perceptive filter; 2) the middle class person would stand out as a foreigner that, only by the looks, still has to answer for the reason he or she is there; and,

45

finally, 3) the fact that lower class residents know each other a lot better, the priority of "the thug" filter is greatly undermined.

The local, as a defining feature of the PCs and as an analytic device, was employed in this chapter to 1) establish the phenomenon, 2) demonstrate its variations, and 3) conclude its political and social significance in the context of the surrounding revolutionary contention. The local worked on the ground, contrasted cities and neighborhoods, and interacted with political organizations and social norms. The significance of the local was demonstrated in the strategic staging and the tactical prioritization of the dynamics of contentious politics, and it, henceforth, explained the varying levels of integration between the PCs - the local residents in control of the ground - and regime challengers. It has, in the meantime, interacted with social norms and inter-neighborhood relations to problematize social constructs of class and its stereotypes. It showed that while the PCs in Alexandria were not an enemy of the political revolution, a situation that will be analytically exploited in the following chapter, they were indeed a force for social conservatism and the preservation of pre-revolutionary social structures and relationships.

CHAPTER THREE: THE POPULAR COMMITTEES AND THE REVOLUTIONARY CONTENTION

This chapter employs the hybrid theoretical approach, synthesized in the Chapter One (section 1.3). In order to put the PCs in the context of the revolutionary contention, this chapter hypothesizes a (Trotskyan) revolutionary situation, in which the state's major function (in this case, policing) and legitimacy on the use of violence is forcibly contested and appropriated by the PCs. Because the PCs do not fit the proposed agent of the classical state-centered theory, they are observed and analyzed using the "ordinary agency" approach, especially that of Bayat (2009). Following this approach, I observe and analyze the quiet, direct and small actions, driven by the need for security, practiced by the local actors which (re)configure and (re)construct the public space and the streets of Egyptian cities to interpret their identity. I then deconstruct their narrative of the "opening-of-the-prisons" to structure their political alliances. And, finally, I evaluate the accumulative effect of the localized actions of the tens of thousands of PCs to devise their strategic agency in the revolutionary contention. The model of contentious politics (Tilly and Tarrow 2006) of the eighteen days is therefore redrawn. The chapter concludes that the PCs appropriated the state's legitimacy on the use of violence, understood themselves as replacing the state's police, internalized partial and limited revolutionary identity, and effectively enforced a nationwide anti-police curfew that established a revolutionary situation and maintained the post-January 28th balance of power that paralyzed the state, secured Tahrir, and contributed to the removal of Mubarak.

3.1 The Dog and the Umbrella: Interpreting the Political Identity of the Popular Committees

On the night of January 28th, Ammar was walking home with his wife from his nearby father-in-law apartment, when they suddenly realized they are walking in the main, wide and normally busy street completely alone. They felt scared, but then they heard a man, standing in an intersection with a knife in his hand, shouting: "Starting today, there will be no government. I am the government!" The saying is taken from a popular Egyptian action movie. "We laughed so hard and became relaxed," Ammar says.

The majority of the interviewees in both Alexandria and Cairo replied to the open question of "How did people spend their time in the streets, since not much was going on?" by making a distinction between the first two nights and the rest of the eighteen days. "The first two nights, people were really afraid. Everyone was talking about this pickup truck packed with thugs and heading here. But we never saw these stuff," Shurki said. The narrative of the pickup truck (that no one actually saw) appears to be a universal, spanning neighborhoods, cities and even regions. Shukri elaborates: "Afterwards it was more like having fun, watching TV, playing PlayStation, football, food and drinks, some kids standing aside smoking hash." Some activists found the situation silly and meaningless, but it was in this relaxed period that the PCs' behavior – relieved of concerns for their safety – became more elaborate, structured, organized and innovative, which provided richer material for analysis and interpretation. "They were bringing those road blocks used by traffic control, putting them on intersections, stopping cars, asking for IDs and searching

48

the car if necessary. You know, police stuff,". Shukri said. I asked him: "Describe to me in detail what exactly happens when PCs stopped you on your long walk home from demonstrations." "Well, you know that police officer [checkpoint] performance. Where are you going? Show me your ID. Where do you live? Where are you coming from? Why?"

The PCs were indeed seeing themselves on a mission to secure their streets, but this in no way explained their elaborate and innovative police performance. For example, in no less than five different places, two in Greater Cairo (al-Bahr al-A'dham in Giza, and al-Muqattam in Cairo) and three in Alexandria (across class divides in Miami, Maharram Bey and al-Ibrahimiyyah) I was told of the practice of leeching a street (untrained) dog and taking it in to circle cars, as if the dog is detecting explosives or drugs. "After going around the car, [our neighbor] Hussein would tell us either 'All good' or 'The dog doesn't like the man.' So we search the car," Karim said. In about the same number of instances, and also spanning class divides, I heard of, what I call, "the umbrella arrangement" (in al-Muqattam in Cairo, and Karmuz, Miami, and al-Hadarah in Alexandria). "You started finding an umbrella with a guy sitting there, and people bringing him IDs to say let him go or bring him over," Shukri described. This is a common Egyptian police checkpoint practice, but, in the case of the latter, is rather based on rank and only implemented in the daytime to protect from sunlight. The police performance was a recurring notion in the interviews that materialized in even more shapes and forms. "I knew that he [i.e. my fellow PC member] couldn't read and I asked him why do you look at IDs. He said 'I look at the photos,'" Khalid said. "It was completely police, even the way he looks up at you from above his

49

glasses [while his head is tilted down], the way he signals you to open your window with his fingers, the confidence; he doesn't talk to you until he finds you are OK, then he starts being friendly - you know, everything," said Shukri. "Everybody was living the role of the police," Ali observed. "They are trying to act like police, but a bit over," Hisham said. "The idea was to act like police," Khalid from Karmuz concluded.

Without the cameras of the world pointed at them, and to an elaborate degree, the PCs were internalizing the important state apparatus of the police and effectively and performatively replacing it. Coupled with the appropriation of the legitimacy of the display of force and the use of violence in the public spaces, the hypothesis that the PCs were, in effect, a revolutionary regime challenger, becomes plausible. This performance was a matter of fact. Whether it was coupled with, or void of, political subjectivity, is what is concluded in the next sections based on an analysis of the PCs' narrativization of the police and of the latter's withdrawal from the streets.

3.2 The Prisoners Dilemma: Deconstructing The Narrative of the Popular Committees

While the PCs were performing police, the PCs almost never mention the police after January 28th. I meant to ask everyone the open question: "What about the police?" And all the answers were similar to Ali's: "What police? Of course there was no police. They wouldn't have dared to show up or move around." The police come up, nevertheless, in the interviewees' answer to two, rather fundamental, questions. The first is about the motivation for joining the PCs, which implicates the police indirectly through "the

50

opening-of-the-prisons" narrative. And the second is about what people were looking for while checking IDs.

"Why did you participate in the PCs?" The answer was uniform and close to literal: The country was messed up; we had to protect our homes. *they opened the prisons and released the prisoners*. The opening-of-the-prisons narrative is foundational to the psyche of the PCs across the nation. The event itself did not receive much scrutiny or credible investigation and remains politicized. Perhaps the only apparently reliable data on the event are some of the youtube videos which are dated a day or two after the event and uploaded by people who seem to have happened to be around the prisons at the time. During the eighteen days, al-Jazeera broadcasted a call from Muhammad Morsi, later-to-be president of Egypt, standing in front of the gates of Wadi al-Natrun prison, and trying to have it on the record that he, and his fellow prisoners and members of the Muslim Brotherhood Guidance Bureau, did not escape. He claimed that he is inside waiting for any official to arrive after the walls of the prison were tore down using construction machinery driven by unknown people, which resulted in all other prisoners escaping (Hamdy 2013).[4] One of my interviewees witnessed the breaking out of the Damanhur prison in the province of al-Bihirah. Amir recounts that it was families of some of the prisoners who brought construction machinery and tore down the prison's walls. A credible NGO report detailed horrible crimes committed against the prisoners during the eighteen days, although in

---

[4] The politicization of the event is apparent in the death sentence imposed on Morsi for "mass jail breaking," a sentence which human rights organizations found politicized (EuroMed Rights 2015).

51

prisons that had no breakouts (EIPR 2011). The point is that it is by no means clear that the prisons were opened as part of a conspiracy by the incumbent regime to scare or punish the population. Further, the scare carried bias and discriminatory ideas against prisoners: it portrayed them as robotic monsters who see getting out of jail as only an opportunity to indiscriminately ambush homes across the country rather than just go to their homes to see their families. And this discriminatory idea was carried almost universally; it spanned class, geographic, age and gender divides, and it was treated uncritically, without pointing out the bias, in almost all scholarship that reported it (such as Bremer (2011), Abu Lughod (2012), El-Meehy (2012), Holmes (2012), Rayan (2013), Bouziane, Harders, and Hoffmann (2013) and Said (2014)) except for Hassan (2015). Nawwar (43), a banker from al-Ibrahimiyyah, passionately recounts the one story - amongst all the chaos and clashes with the police that he witnessed - that made him run home and advocate the forming of a PC amongst his neighbors. The story demonstrates the bias towards, and the fear of, prisoners that made their escape as fundamental as it is to the psyche of the PCs:

> I was walking by al-Raml Police Station and found it burnt down and people's [civil registry] documents are forming like a carpet from the beginning to the end of the [wide] street. Then I saw this – oh my God! - a woman with a white galabiyyah, and she is ... she is white [as in light in color, not as in race] but she is big like a man. She is a woman who is white and red. It looks like she just received a beating; her face was full of blood. She is coming out of detention. I saw this and headed home, grabbed my kids and went to my mom's place and told my neighbors to come down to the street with whatever arms that they have. All I am thinking is that my building's main door is made of glass."

Whether it is state media that is propagating the news of the prison break, or "strangers running by and shouting it" (as Nawwar said), it was believed to have been

52

orchestrated by the government and the police. It is general knowledge, moreover, that prison management is a function of the Ministry of Interior that is also in charge of policing. Significantly, the narrativization of the event incubated revolutionary rationales and implied an internalization of an alliance with the regime challengers and characterization of the government, the state media and the police as the enemy. For some interviewees, the incident was interpreted as an attempt by the police to "bring the house down on everyone," as Ammar put it. For others, it was an attempt to "make us know we need them, that we can't do without them," as Hisham put it. "They play on your basic needs, on our security; they want you to kneel before them and beg them to come back," he added. Freedom and social justice were not shared language between the PCs and Tahrir, but these narratives were.

The matter of fact that the PCs took on the role of the police was coupled with an identity that can be seen in their elaborate performance. The PCs narrativization of the police, moreover, framed the practice and the identity with an unofficial and undeclared alliance with the regime challengers. The three elements materialized further in the PCs effective enforcement of a strategic anti-police curfew - discussed below.

3.3 "Look for Number 7": Devising the Strategy of the Popular Committees

Enmity with the police was not only a result of the narrativization of the "opening-of-the-prisons." Some of the reasons for the enmity are historical, related to the Egyptian

police's history of abuse of citizens.[5] "This guy has been humiliated by an officer; this has been cursed by an officer, and so on. They were trying to get revenge," Khalid said about the young men who decided to take over the police station on the night of January 28th in Karmuz. Furthermore, official state reports estimate the number of deaths during the eighteen days to be at least 846.[6] When Khalid returned home that night, everyone was talking about the young martyr who lived in his street whom the police killed hours earlier; a large banner with his photo was put on his building and hangs on until today. It can also be argued that Alexandria's PC enmity with the police was intensified by its localized nature and revolutionary strategy. As part of the common Egyptian demonstration practice to send messages to local residents at every opportunity (noted in section 2.1.2), Karim and Sayyid both recount that every time a demonstration passed by a police station, burnt or not, it stops and chants the names of victims who are known to have been tortured to death in police stations, then they use "impolite" chants against the police, then they move to calling for the downfall of Mubarak and the regime.

This brings us to the other context in which police is brought up by the interviewees: the checking of IDs. "We were securing the area, you know, from thugs or police," Khalid said. "We were making sure they are not police," Ali confirmed. Sayyid from al-

---

[5] Amnesty 2011 report states that "Torture of detainees has been systemic and widespread for decades in Egypt's police stations, prisons and SSI detention centres, and has been committed with virtual impunity" (Amnesty International 2011).

[6] See The Investigation and Fact Finding Committee on the January Revolution (2011). The number is based solely on official reports by the Ministry of Health, obtained from hospital records. The number is definitely larger. Many hospitals were not working on January 28th; hundreds of people disappeared; others were buried without going to hospitals, and some later official investigations (see Hill and Mansour (2013)) were leaked to have reported further murders committed by the army.

Ibrahimiyyah was once in a lower class area and while talking with his friends there, he was told that "we look for number 7 in [the beginning of the social security number in] the ID. This means he is undercover police." Both lower class and middle class interviewees, including political activists, made it clear that they were checking the IDs of drivers and pedestrians to confirm they are not police, but some of those of the middle class who did not say it explicitly, put it in terms of matter-of-fact: "Police personnel should not move around at this time. If people saw one of them, they will party over him," Islam (26), a musician from Janaklis, said.

During the eighteen days, the army declared a night curfew whose hours occasionally changed. From the interviews, it was clear that the PC members understood the curfew as legitimately called for by the circumstances, something the activists did not generally believe. Further, the interviews implied that the PC members thought of their task as enforcing the curfew. "Don't you know that there is a curfew now?" was the public rationale used by the PCs to confront people when stopped, and especially if they have objections. However, when a PC stopped someone, they would just look for a legitimate reason why that person is here, or why they should let him or her pass. Any reason seemed to work: the person is from the area (according to his or her ID), the person knows someone who lives in the area, or the person needs to pass through the area for a reason or another. Everyone would eventually let pass, except, as the interviews show, if the person is affiliated with the police in a way or another. Police seemed to be the only segment of the population which the PCs determined would not allow to move around. It also appears that

PCs restriction on police movement was an understanding that the police knew and did not attempt to challenge except in rare cases. "I had friends from the police. They never showed up these days. They stayed home and their windows and balconies were always closed," Shukri said. I heard only one case where one of my interviewees, Sayyid, actually witnessed a police officer on the street. The officer was surely in civilian clothes, but wary of hostility, he was hiding a machine gun and letting his mother drive and deal with the PCs. His true intention was to reach the nearest ATM machine where his mom can withdraw her monthly pension (at the end of the month of January), and Sayyid monitored his mom withdraw the money, advised him not to do it again, and watched him leave. Abbas, the activist from al-Ismailiyyah who has been mistaken for a criminal and handed to the army, saw, in the military camp, lower ranking police personnel tied up, apparently handed over to the military by the PCs. Other than these two stories, of all the interviews that I conducted in seven provinces, none actually met a police officer on the move. Nevertheless, most of the interviewees heard of an encounter with a police officer, a story that is mainly about the humiliation of that officer that they recall with jubilation. "He was greatly humiliated. He was interrogated about everything, and I was told the [PC] guy who dealt with him had a hash joint in one hand and a sword in the other. The officer was [metaphorically] ripped apart," said Shukri about a police officer whom he heard was "caught," as he put it, in al-Siyuf, a lower class neighborhood in Alexandria. Similar to the narrative of the truck that is loaded with thugs, that of the opening-of-the-prisons and others, the story of the humiliation of the police officer that was captured by a PC was

56

repeated in many neighborhoods, but was failed to have been witnessed by any of my interviewees. These reports are surely not exhaustive of the incidents in Alexandria or the nation, but what matters to my argument is the narrativization, according to which, police personnel is not only portrayed as the enemy, but also as outlaws and legitimate targets for the PCs to hunt for.

The PCs effectively took over the function of the state police and the legitimacy of the display of force and the use of violence in order to maintain a certain level of order and enforce certain rules. By their performance, they appear to have, moreover, deliberately internalized a police identity. According to their narrativization of the "opening-of-the-prison" event, the PCs subjectively allied with the regime challengers against the incumbent regime. Finally, all of this materialized in small actions whose accumulate amounted to what can be considered an anti-police curfew. Such a curfew is one of the most strategic factors for the success of the revolution in removing Mubarak. After the army decided not to attack Tahrir, the police remained the only force willing to do so. It was forced to withdraw on January 28th, and the PCs prevented it from even considering regrouping or re-mobilizing. January 28th created a power balance to the disadvantage of the regime, and the PCs turned it into a temporary dual power situation. Therefore, the regime's one and only ground attack on Tahrir - the Battle of the Camel on February 2nd - was not executed by official forces, but by civilians, including sympathizers, ruling party beneficiaries, and some undercover police. The PCs' enforced curfew against the police

was the background against which Tahrir stayed relatively safe for demonstrators to call on the removal of Mubarak and to take credit for it.

The approach of the ordinary agency theories, especially that of Bayat (2009), with its focus on the public space, the small direct and quiet actions of the local actors, and the evaluation of the accumulative effects of the millions of actors, facilitated – after it was removed from its assumed authoritarian context and placed in one of state-breakdown – the observation, the analysis and the interpretation of the actions of the PCs. In my hybrid theoretical approach, ordinary agency theories populated the constitutive concepts of the state-centered theory on revolutionary contention, especially those of identity, political alliance and strategy. The employment of the hybrid approach confirms the hypothesis that the PCs were a contender in a (Trotskyan) revolutionary situation.

It is important to conclude this chapter with yet another reminder of the power of the local. Despite all the enmity with, and the hunt for, the police, the local meant that the police officer can be a local ally, and sometimes an appreciated one – similar to the local "thug" whose task was to secure the area from "foreign" thugs. "My neighbor is a traffic officer. He is a good guy. He used to join us at night. My [other] neighbor would give him the [PC invented piece of cloth that serves as a] white badge, and he will stay," Hisham said. "Not all officers are sons of dogs, you know. We have one in our street who is loved. People were glad that he is joining us with his gun and stuff," Sayyid said. Naeem, in al-Muqattam in Cairo, had a more elaborate story in which an officer from the neighborhood was touring the area with civilians, telling everyone that everything is OK and that he is

ready with his gun to defend them. "He was in civilian clothes, of course, and if it weren't for our recognizable neighbors accompanying him, he wouldn't have dared to declare his affiliation," Naeem reflected on the situation. Civilian cover was necessary for an officer to participate in his PC, but more importantly, that officer would not have been able to cross his street to the next street, maintaining thereby my conclusion of the anti-police curfew. An officer blending and conforming with his block's PC was rather an affirmation of the power of the PC, not that of the police.

CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUDING REMARKS

The study of the PCs demonstrates the productivity in the inclusion of local, ordinary and violent phenomena in the analysis and the framing of the Egyptian revolution and transformation. To be sure, this thesis does not argue for the exclusion of other phenomena, of the study of central, structural, discursive, traditionally political, or social-movement phenomena. Indeed, the theoretical approach that the thesis contributes is one that utilizes the state-centered theory of the revolutionary contention for its main hypothesis, for the situation of the phenomenon, and for the contextualization and the staging of the research. The limitations of state-centered theories, however, are exposed when its constitutive concepts were vacuumed and were rather populated using the local as an analytic category along with the micro-sociological ordinary-agency theories. Only then, sociopolitical theory was able to interpret the identity, the politics and the strategy of millions of Egyptian actors; construct the public space of the Egyptian cities; chart inter-neighborhood class relationships; explain variations in ground and tactical dynamics; and expand the political map to include not only the relationships between state institutions and political organizations, but also between each of these and the general public that does not ideologically or organizationally affiliate with either. The majority of the Egyptian population are no more merely a political subject; they become political actors, agents and players. The thesis, in this way, rewrites, contextualizes, and diversifies a more comprehensive and inclusive history of the early developments of the Egyptian revolution. While the central state institutions seemed to hang on, and while Tahrir was largely

peacefully demanding the removal of Mubarak, the local and ordinary was forcefully wresting the state's legitimacy on the use of violence, performing its basic function of policing, and strategically enabling Tahrir. The phenomenon of the PCs, in the way it is established, characterized and interpreted in this thesis, promises to push, beyond the purposes of this thesis, a deeper, more comprehensive and a more profound understanding of the Egyptian society. The PCs had the freedom to construct the Egyptian public space, to organize, to make social and political choices, and to use violence, free from the control of the state, and therefore a lot more sociological, anthropological and political interpretation of their structures and behavior can build on this thesis.

4.1 Political vs Social Revolution

This thesis should not be taken as an argument on the side of those who characterize the Egyptian events of 2011 and beyond as a revolution.[7] The thesis substantially establishes a revolutionary situation, and only implies a (limited and partial political) revolutionary outcome. The latter is, in Trotsky/Tilly's tradition, is established when one of the forces contending for the legitimacy and government succeeds in displacing the other (Tilly 1978, 193-222). This is indeed beyond the scope of this thesis. The establishment of a revolutionary situation, however, in addition to the above, demonstrates the magnitude, the intensity and the diversity of political participation in the early phases of the revolution. But it also demonstrates the ways in which the PCs inhibited and limited its progress. The focus on the progressive utopia of Tahrir during the eighteen days – with its gender,

---

[7] For some background and perspectives on this debate, see Coombs (2011) and Bayat (2013).

religious and class equality and inclusivity - can create an early illusion that the Egyptian revolution is a progressive social revolution (such as in Zizek (2011) and Alexander (2011)). Davidson (2015) elaborates on a distinction between political revolutions, which involves mainly a regime change, and social revolutions whose transfer of power reflects radical changes in class relations, social norms and values, and in the mode of production. While on the longer term, things can develop in different directions, inclusion of the PCs predicts and explains that a social revolution was by no means close. In addition to the maintenance of class and property relations, the PCs almost completely excluded women from participation and from the process of decision making. Every interviewee said that there has not been one woman in any PC he or she knew about, with the exception of one upper middle class area (Zamalik in Cairo) in which one interviewee reported seeing a woman or two participate about a week after January 28th. The area, as explained earlier (in the beginning of Chapter Two), is an upper class one, that is an island whose entrances were heavily securitized by, in some cases, machine guns, and was therefore hardly representative of the larger Egyptian street conditions. In one instant, Shirin from Cairo told me that she used to visit Tahrir daily and return home around eight or nine at night. A couple of times, the PCs in her block asked her father why does he let her go to Tahrir and come back at night, implying that he should not.

Furthermore, the PCs relationship with the army serve as an additional precursor to future developments and locates the hegemony which the Egyptian state managed to maintain during the revolution. The gap between the PCs' relationship with the police and

62

their relationship with the army could not have been wider. It is not an exaggeration to describe the PCs' relationship with the latter as intimate and passionate. The army slowly mobilized during the eighteen days, starting January 28th. In all neighborhoods, people welcomed the army openly and cheered whenever they passed by. "We dealt with them with all the love, played with their machine guns, and life was beautiful," Ali said. Even the regime challengers, conscious of their conflict with the regime, had no doubts about cooperating with the army. "We coordinated with the military generals," a statement I heard from two prominent activists: Amir, from al-Bihirah and Abbas from al-Ismailiyyah.

The army was not active on the ground. Salah describes the situation: "We saw an armed vehicle passing by close to our street on January 29th. Later they had points where they were stationed … They started with their social club on the Corniche and gradually increased existence … I don't remember exactly when and where they took positions but they reached [our next main road] late, like after we realized we can secure the place." "They were just passing by greeting us and asking if there are any problems," Ali said. "The army did not intervene at all in [the central area] of Sidi Gabir. They had a few tanks, one at the train station, another on the corniche and another at their military camp. They had nothing to do with what is going on in Sidi Gabir or on the ground," Karim said. The army appears to have not stationed within several lower class areas and was only accessible to them some kilometers away. In many instances, when people called the army emergency numbers, either no one responded or no one showed up. But it appears that one practice

that both the PCs and the army shared was torture and disproportionate violence.[8] "We used to see people tied up to trees. They could stay for the whole day before they are handed over to the army," Abbas said. Hisham, after handing the person that was suspected to have stolen a tool from a hair salon to the army, saw that al-Montazah Park has been transformed into a detention center, and found the detainees beaten up in very bad conditions. "They treated thieves the way Egyptians will treat any thief, you know. They get their share and a little more," said Karim. I even heard a couple of reports of deaths but none of them was firsthand.

4.2 Future Research

"The social contract of informality" (Bouziane, Harders, and Hoffmann 2013) and the "slow encroachement of the ordinary" (Bayat 2009) explain why the vast majority of the Egyptian populace did not identify with a political ideology, party, organization, or otherwise. The situation of the state-breakdown and the emergence of the PCs provided a historically rare opportunity to study the political agency of this large segment of the population. Preliminary research suggests that the condition theorized by this thesis continued for several years. This condition was distinguished by 1) the breaking down of the state's legitimacy on the use of violence to the local, street and neighborhood levels; 2) consequently, the significant and prioritized role of the local, ordinary and violent actors in the determination of central political conditions of contention; in addition to 3) the episodic and decisive exercise of local political violence. This exercise of local violence

---

[8] On the army's practices in the 28 days, see Hill and Mansour (2013).

has been directed against all political contenders to the revolution at different times. On January 28th, when this condition was founded, it was exercised against the police. At times during the year 2011, it was exercised against regime challengers and secular political activists.[9] From December, 2012 to June, 2013, it was exercised on a large scale, almost on a weekly basis, against the Muslim Brotherhood.[10] This condition seems to have continued until sometime after the ousting of Muhammad Morsi on July 3rd, when the state was, gradually, granted back the legitimacy on the use of violence, initially for the oppression of the Muslim Brotherhood.[11] This theorized condition, along with its actors, sociopolitical dynamics, and rules of engagement and interaction, promise to produce, using a methodology similar to the one employed in this thesis, rich and comprehensive insights, alternative histories, and explanatory frameworks that are otherwise inaccessible.

The theoretical approach hybridized (in sections 1.3) and tested (in Chapter Three) can also be applied to similar contexts of social transformation, revolutionary situations, or state-breakdowns. The idea behind the approach can more generally inspire methodologies in sociological, anthropological and/or political science research on cases where the subjects of study occupy the same environment but seem incompatible or conflicting in scale, structure or location.

---

[9] See Daily Mail (2011) for an example.

[10] The story of the first casualty of these civil clashes is illustrative of its conditions. See Fathi (2012) for details.

[11] It is an indication that on August 26th, millions of Egyptians responded to el-Sisi's call for "delegating" him the authority to crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood, and the day is now known in Egypt as The Delegation. The media reports translated it as "The Mandate." Original Arabic naming can be found at BBC Arabic (2013).

4.3 The Legacy of the Popular Committees

As mentioned in the Introduction (section 1.2), the literature that work with the PCs post-Mubarak (either primarily, such as El-Meehy (2012) and Rayan (2013) or secondarily, such as Said (2014) and Harders (2015)) highlight the significant differences between the pre- and the post-Mubarak PCs, but they all assume that the pre- and the post-Mubarak phenomena are two stages in an evolutionary process, perhaps because they carry the same name. Additionally, one can see in these literatures ahistorical development that starts with high expectations for the PCs and ends up with some disappointment over their diminishing role, in 2012, and their eventual disappearance, in 2013 and 2014. I spoke to Randa from Cairo, whose job, during 2012 and 2013, was the supporting the popular committees in Cairo for the purposes of enhancing social and economic rights. Her description of the composition, the organization and the activities of the post-Mubarak PCs appear to bear no resemblances to the PCs of the eighteen days, except for the name. The post-Mubarak PC is, obviously, unarmed, does not police, and claims to represent an area with at least thousands of residents. The way a post-Mubarak PC was organized ranges from a bunch of youths who decided to adopt direct actions, like breaking into government offices demanding infrastructure installed in their area, to a group of older local businessmen who decided to negotiate with the government over developing their neighborhood for the betterment of their business conditions.

Characterizing the PCs as a local and ordinary phenomenon that is fundamentally stimulated by necessity - in this case, security - explain their contingency and conditioning.

66

While it was possible to observe, analyze and interpret the PCs as a political actor on the national stage, the analytic categories and the approaches employed carried within them the seeds of the PCs' demise. The fact that the PCs are a fundamentally local and ordinary phenomenon, meant that they have no organizational, ideological or other structural potential to continue to exist - in the way they did during the eighteen days - outside this framework and those conditions of necessity. Based on the interview with Randa, and on my experience, and based on the occasional calls for the reemergence of the popular committees during the past five years,[12] it appears that the survived legacy of the PCs is in their name, and in what this name is understood to carry. What seems to be shared in the post-Mubarak's national discourse on the PCs and the claims to their heritage are emphasis on localization (no PC would claim to present Alexandria or Cairo, for example), legitimate representation that is usually contrasted with governmental legitimacy, and emergency takeover of basic state roles, especially that of security. In the volatile and unstable situation in Egypt, the future of this legacy, if any, is yet to be written.

---

[12] For example, on August 14th, when the army and the police attacked the pro-Morsi sit-in in Rab'ah, and clashes around police stations, churches and other places (EIPR 2014) seemed to be taking the country to an uncertain situation, perhaps another breakdown, many people called in the media for the return of popular committees and it was said that many were immediately formed. See Abi-Habib (2013).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abi-Habib, Maria. 2013. "In Egypt Clashes, Civilians Oppose Protesters." *Wall Street Journal*, August 17, sec. World. http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887324139404579016443005082408.

Abu-Lughod, Lila. 2012. "Living the 'revolution' in an Egyptian Village: Moral Action in a National Space." *American Ethnologist* 39 (1): 21–25. doi:10.1111/j.1548-1425.2011.01341.x.

Alexander, Jeffrey C. 2011. *Performative Revolution in Egypt: An Essay in Cultural Power*. London; New York: Bloomsbury.

al-Jazeera. 2016. *The Popular Committees in the Egyptian Revolution Documentary*. Happened in Egypt. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eFOWQR-9IP8.

Amnesty International. 2011. "Time for Justice: Egypt's Corrosive System of Detention." London, United Kingdom: Amnesty International. https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/document/?indexNumber=mde12%2f029%2f2011&language=en.

Association for Free Thought and Expression. 2016. "Suspects: The Security Harassment of Foreign Researchers in Egypt." Cairo: Association for Free Thought and Expression. http://afteegypt.org/academic_freedoms/2016/04/14/12083-afteegypt.html?lang=en.

Bayat, Asef. 2009. *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*. First Edition edition. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press.

———. 2013. "Revolution in Bad Times." *New Left Review*, no. 80: 47 – 60.

BBC Arabic. 2013. "Six Deaths and More Than 200 Injuries in the 'Delagation' [al-Tafwid] Friday Clashes in Egypt." *BBC Arabic*. July 26. http://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast/2013/07/130726_egypt_friday_wrap.

Blomfield, Adrian. 2012. "Five Killed after Attackers Storm Cairo Protest," May 2, sec. World. http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/egypt/9240521/Five-killed-after-attackers-storm-Cairo-protest.html.

Bouziane, M., C. Harders, and A. Hoffmann, eds. 2013. *Local Politics and Contemporary Transformations in the Arab World: Governance Beyond the Center*. 2013 edition. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire ; New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Bremer, Jennifer Ann. 2011a. "Leadership and Collective Action in Egypt's Popular Committees: Emergence of Authentic Civic Activism in the Absence of the State." *International Journal of Not-for-Profit Law* 13 (4).

———. 2011b. "Leadership and Collective Action in Egypt's Tahrir Revolution: Emergence of Civic Activism in Response to Repression." In Rome, Italy.

Coombs, Nathan. 2011. "Political Semantics of the Arab Revolts / Uprisings / Riots / Insurrections / Revolutions." *Journal of Critical Globalisation Studies* 4 (4): 138–147.

Daily Mail. 2011. "Security Fire Tear Gas at Protesters after Violent Street Clashes Break out over Political Change in Egypt." *Daily Mail Online*. July 24.

http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2018246/Security-tear-gas-protesters-violent-street-clashes-break-political-change-Egypt.html.

Davidson, Neil. 2015. "Is Social Revolution Still Possible in the Twenty-First Century?" *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*, December.

Egyptian Judiciary Committee for Elections. 2011. "2011 Parliamentary Elections List Results on the Map." *Elections.Egypt*. https://parliament2011.elections.eg/statistics/lists-results-on-map.

EIPR. 2011. "Martyrs Behind Bars... Killings and Torture of Prisoners During Egypt's Revolution." Cairo: Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights. http://eipr.org/en/report/2011/08/24/1300.

———. 2014. "Weeks of Killing: State Violence, Communal Violence and Sectarian Attacks in the Summer of 2013." Cairo: Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights. http://eipr.org/en/report/2014/06/18/2124.

El Chazli, Youssef. 2016. "A Geography of Revolt in Alexandria, Egypt's Second Capital." *Metropolitics*. February 23. http://www.metropolitiques.eu/A-Geography-of-Revolt-in.html.

El-Meehy, A. 2012. "Egypt's Popular Committees'." *Middle East Report*, no. 42: 265.

EuroMed Rights. 2015. "Morsi's Death Sentence: Manipulating Justice to Eradicate Dissent." *EuroMed Rights – Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network*. May 22. http://euromedrights.org/publication/morsis-death-sentence-manipulating-justice-to-eradicate-dissent/.

Fathi, Yasmine. 2012. "The Battle for the 'Martyr' of Damanhour - Politics - Egypt - Ahram Online." *Ahram Online*. November 28. http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContentP/1/59330/Egypt/The-battle-for-the-martyr-of-Damanhour.aspx.

Fentress, James J., and Chris Wickham. 2009. *Social Memory: New Perspectives on the Past*. New York: ACLS Humanities E-Book.

Goldstone, Jack A. 2002. *Revolutions: Theoretical, Comparative, and Historical Studies*. 3 edition. Belmont, CA: Cengage Learning.

Gramsci, Antonio, and Joseph A. Buttigieg. 1992. *Prison Notebooks*. Vol. 2. Columbia University Press.

Hamdy, Mohamed. 2013. *Morsi's Call to Al-Jazeera Channel at the Moment of His Escape from Prison*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qq8EydtBnxE.

Harders, Cilja. 2015. "'State Analysis from Below' and Political Dynamics in Egypt after 2011." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 47 (1): 148–151. doi:10.1017/S0020743814001524.

Hassan, Hatem M. 2015. "Extraordinary Politics of Ordinary People: Explaining the Microdynamics of Popular Committees in Revolutionary Cairo." *International Sociology* 30 (4): 383–400. doi:10.1177/0268580915585238.

Hill, Evan, and Muhammad Mansour. 2013. "Egypt's Army Took Part in Torture and Killings during Revolution, Report Shows." *The Guardian*, April 10, sec. World news. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/apr/10/egypt-army-torture-killings-revolution.

Holmes, Amy. 2012. "There Are Weeks When Decades Happen: Structure and Strategy in the Egyptian Revolution." *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, December.

Ismail, Salwa. 2006. *Political Life in Cairo's New Quarters: Encountering the Everyday State*. 1 edition. Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press.

Kraminick, Isaac. 1972. "Reflections on Revolution: Definition and Explanation in Recent Scholarship." *History and Theory* 11 (1): 26–63. doi:10.2307/2504623.

Rayan, Lamyaa. 2013. "Informal Ties, Social Capital and Development: Popular Committees in Egypt, a Case Study Post-25th of January Revolution." American University in Cairo.

Rhoads, Christopher, and Geoffrey A. Fowler. 2011. "Egypt Shuts Down Internet, Cellphone Services." *Wall Street Journal*, January 29, sec. Tech. http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748703956604576110453371369740.

Said, Atef Shahat. 2014. "The Tahrir Effect: History, Space, and Protest in the Egyptian Revolution of 2011." University of Michigan.

Scott, James C. 1987. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. Reprint edition. Princeton, N.J.: Yale University Press.

———. 1992. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. Revised ed. edition. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Spradley, J.P. 1979. *The Ethnographic Interview*. Anthropology / [Harcourt College]. Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

The Guardian. 2011. "Hosni Mubarak's Speech: Full Text." *The Guardian*. February 2. http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/feb/02/president-hosni-mubarak-egypt-speech.

The Investigation and Fact Finding Committee on the January Revolution. 2011. "Summary of the Final Report of the Investigation and Fact Finding Committee Regarding the Events that Accompanied the January Revolution." Cairo,Egypt. http://www.ffnc-eg.org/assets/ffnc-eg_final.pdf.

Tilly, Charles. 1978. *From Mobilization to Revolution*. First Edition edition. New York: Random House.

Tilly, Charles, and Sidney Tarrow. 2006. *Contentious Politics*. 1 edition. Oxford, Oxon, UK: Oxford University Press.

Wafd News. 2011. *The Battle of the Camel in Tahrir Square 2-2-2011*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y9D9Fsym0_I.

Weber, Max, W. G. Runciman, and E. Matthews. 1978. "Politics as a Vocation." In *Max Weber*. Cambridge University Press.

Zizek, Slavoj. 2011. "For Egypt, This Is the Miracle of Tahrir Square." *The Guardian*, February 10, sec. Opinion. http://www.theguardian.com/global/2011/feb/10/egypt-miracle-tahrir-square.